Interview with Robert F. Franklin

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project Information Series

ROBERT F. FRANKLIN

Interviewed by: Earl Wilson

Initial interview date: March 4, 1988

Q: March 4, 1988, San Francisco. This is Earl Wilson and I'm interviewing Robert F. Franklin in San Francisco, who is a retired USIA officer. Bob, can you tell us where you were born, educated and so on before you got in?

Biosketch and Road to VOA Employment Via Army

FRANKLIN: Yes. I'm a native of San Francisco, which is a little bit rare, was reared in the city, and went to a local high school. Immediately after high school I started working in the broadcasting business and very shortly thereafter started working my way part-time through college—University of California. I also happened to be in the National Guard, however, and early in 1941 we were called to active duty. I spent the next five years in uniform. I went in as a sergeant and came out as a captain. First, I was commissioned and kept on as a teacher at the Signal School for about a year, then went overseas to North Africa, Italy, into Southern France, and ultimately into Germany.

I guess that was in a sense the start of my interest in the USIA sort of thing. During the latter part of my service I was in the Psychological Warfare Branch, which was a kind of a dog's breakfast of English, French and American officers and civilians from OWI,

specialists in all the information media. We had some interesting times. My small team wound up taking over Radio Stuttgart and putting it back on the air, broadcasting to the German people.

After the war I went back in the broadcasting business in San Francisco. Incidentally, I have two arms in broadcasting. I have a technical background and also did a lot of announcing and writing.

Things were very good right after the war, then everything sort of died down. I took a couple of weeks active duty as a reserve officer, went out here to our local Presidio, and ran into a fellow that I'd known ten years before who was working there as a civilian. As we chatted, “Say, I've heard the Voice of America is hiring overseas.”

“That's interesting,” I said, “that might be an interesting job. I think I'll write them.” So I did.

1951: Employment With VOA—Tangier Relay Station

And to make a long story short, early in 1951 I, with my wife and seven year old child, went to Tangier. At Tangier I was involved in the initial setting up and operating of the Tangier Relay Base for the Voice of America.

Q: What type of title was that then?

FRANKLIN: Engineer; staff engineer. Well, I guess they called us Shift Supervisors, actually, because we had locals under us doing the slog work, so to speak, and we supervised them.

Q: Where was the facility located?

FRANKLIN: We had two plants. The office was in town, in Tangier. Our receiving plant was nine kilometers south of the town and our transmitting plant was 21 kilometers south of the town. We had to separate them because of potential interference from the

transmitters, of course. The equipment was very good, and for the most part it worked well.

Q: New equipment?

FRANKLIN: Oh, yes. Brand new. It was a new installation. It had actually started on the air just a short time before I got there. But not all of the transmitters were on when I arrived. We had banks of receivers, picked up transmissions from the States and relayed them to the Middle East, Europe, the Soviet Union. I think that was about all at the time. India, perhaps; I'm not sure. My memory fails me on that point.

Q: I don't think we had discovered Africa, sub-Saharan Africa.

FRANKLIN: No. At that point we didn't pay much attention to sub-Saharan Africa. That's true.

1952: Moroccans Riot Over French Failureto Give Morocco Independence

Q: Okay. So anything particular happen of interest?

FRANKLIN: Well, yes. This was also the start of my attracting trouble in places where I was stationed. This would have been about 1952, I think, more or less in the middle of my tour. The French had promised to turn Morocco over to the Moroccans and they didn't. And the Moroccans had an uprising in Tangier, calling in the RIFS, from the mountain zone nearby, and really just generally causing trouble. They were turning over parked cars in the streets and burning them. They were shoving Europeans off the sidewalks and, on a couple of occasions, beating up on them, all in resentment over the French breaking their promise. And, of course, bear in mind that an American is more or less indistinguishable from a Frenchman as far as a Moroccan native is concerned. So we wound up carrying guns to work. I left my wife at home with a little 22 caliber target pistol, which was the only other gun we had, and I took along a Beretta that I'd picked up during the war. We actually

didn't run into any trouble. But we felt safer if, walking down the street in the main part of town, we were carrying something a bit imposing. I happened to have about an 18 inch steel bar that I carried. Nobody bothered me. Nobody bothered me at all. But that was the only incident.

A curious thing about that: My wife said, “oh, Mother will be worried.” (Her mother was in Washington state.) “I'll send her a telegram.” Well, it hadn't appeared in the US press at all; there was no mention of it. And my mother-in-law had no idea why she was sending a telegram. But that was about the only untoward incident. Oh, we had a little Arab servant who was really an imbecile. But very, very pleasant, did washing well and ironed like a woman; did a beautiful job. He announced to our Spanish cook that they were going to cut our throats and take over the house and take over all of Tangier.

Q: Really.

FRANKLIN: We kept him on nonetheless. He wasn't really violent.

Q: Any Americans involved with the project have any problems?

FRANKLIN: Not to my knowledge, Earl. No. We were all nervous for a week to ten days. That's really about all.

Q: And then did the French leave during your time?

FRANKLIN: No, no. Tangier was an international zone you see. It didn't belong to the French and the French couldn't have turned it over. It was French Morocco, most of the country, they would have turned over, but this did not come about until several years later. I think about '58 or '59. I don't recall exactly when.

One other thing, as an amusing sidelight, was my wife's bread episode in Tangier. She has a taste for whole wheat bread. And we couldn't get any of that there. The bread wasn't very good. So she thought, well, why don't I bake some? A good idea! But our oven

was too small, so she went out, looked up the local Arab baker, who happened to be a neighbor, and asked him if he could bake the bread for her. Oh, he said, he'd be happy to. So she sought out all the ingredients in local shops, mixed the dough, put it in pans, and brought it down to the Arab baker to be put in his big oven. He said to come back in whatever it was, an hour or two, and he'd have it all ready.

So she went back to find that the Arab who, of course, was used to unleavened bread as distinct from bread that rises, had very assiduously, with his big wooden paddle, taken out her bread on several occasions during the baking and patted it firmly down so that it ended in looking like so many large, fat pancakes rather than bread.

Franklin Acquired French During War Years

Q: Did you speak French then?

FRANKLIN: Well, I started speaking French during the war. I had taken German in school, with a very poor grade I must say, and knew practically nothing about French. But my job in the early part of the war involved setting up automatic relay stations for radio teletype on mountain tops. When you get out there you're obliged to communicate a little bit with somebody, and I wasn't really up to Arabic at that time, to tell you the truth, so I found it expedient to pick up on a little bit of French.

I got up into Italy later on. And a couple of German observers, a pilot and observer together, were shot down over us. Our particular relay point at that moment was on Promontorio Garganico which is the spur of Italy's boot. It's a high plateau, a butte, about 1,500 feet above the Foggia Plain. There were no other troops up there, nobody around, so we went out and picked them up.

I was really ashamed at how hard it was for me to communicate with them, my having taken German in school. So I asked my wife to send me a couple of books and I studied

up a little bit. Later on I got a crash course in German when I joined the Psychological Warfare Branch, before we went to Germany.

In the meantime, of course, we went to Corsica as a staging area and then went in on the invasion of Southern France. I really began to pick up on French while I was in France. Again, because we were in small groups and only a couple of us had any linguistic inclinations at all—and we had to communicate.

1954: From Tangier Relay Stationto Radio Officer, Saigon

Q: Then the French you had when you went to your next post which I understand was Saigon?

FRANKLIN: That's right. I was French speaking and had a radio-broadcasting background which is the reason they asked me to replace the radio officer. I must tell you about this.

A fellow named Frank Mullen was the previous radio officer who managed to render the daughter of the Chief of Police in Saigon pregnant.

Q: I have to interpose right there one minute. I want to get a time frame. It's around early 1954 we're talking about.

FRANKLIN: That's correct. I think I arrived in April of '54 in Saigon.

Q: Okay, now back to the police chief.

FRANKLIN: Well, it was gently suggested that he might do better to resign, which he did. But, of course, they were left without a radio officer, and things at that time were really getting hot in Indochina. It was the period of Dien Bien Phu. The Viet Minh were winning. The French pretty much had their backs against the wall. And we didn't know quite where we were going.

The French Lose Dien Bien Phu—Cede North Vietnam to Hanoi

So anyway, I was sent over and asked to sort of restart a radio program which I did. I got involved with the aid program there, too. We did audio tracks for AID motion pictures and that sort of thing. So it was an active period. Very shortly after I arrived, I don't suppose it was more than a month, I was sent up to Hanoi where Martin Ackerman at that time was the branch PAO. You remember Martin I'm sure. Howie Thomas was up there, also.

Q: That was a rather pleasant town, wasn't it?

FRANKLIN: Well, now that was a wild town. Because this was all French troops. The French to support the moral had sent in entertainment from Paris, the best entertainment they could get, the nightclubs and all that. So it was a very interesting time. However, Dien Bien Phu finally collapsed.

The agreement was that the French would render all of North Vietnam to the Viet Minh on a certain date. It was sometime in the middle of the year. And I went up with my chief local whose name I cannot recall but who shortly thereafter went to work for the Voice. You can probably look him up in the Vietnamese section, at least in the record.

He and I went up to see what we could see on this turnover. And he made a report in Vietnamese; I made a report in English—these were all on rather primitive portable tape recorders at that time, battery operated— which we sent back by pouch to Saigon. I recall that we recorded the Viet Minh, who were very militant singers. We had really quite a singing concert there where they had taken over one area. They didn't bother us.

We were hitching a ride with a fellow named John McGowan. This was not your John McGowan. He was an Army Major, an assistant military attach#. We found a hill in Hanoi where we could get a good view of a large area. There were plenty of people in the streets (this was a popular rebellion) and everywhere you could see more and more Viet Minh flags, the red field with the gold star centered. And, as I wrote into the little piece that I

sent back, the major said, “you know, something is very familiar about this.” He thought a moment, then he snapped his fingers and said, “I know! It looks just like the takeover of East Berlin. All the red flags popping out here and there.”

Right. One little interesting incident: My local employee, my assistant, had a sister who lived not far from the Red River Bridge, and he wanted to drop off briefly and see his sister. I said, all right, five minutes, ten minutes, don't be very long. So we parked in this large square near where his sister lived. She was half a block away. The significance of the Red River Bridge or the Red River was that it marked the border between the area that was to be immediately occupied at that time by the Viet Minh and the sort of reserved area around Haiphong, the adjacent port city, that was not to be turned over for several months.

As we learned later, the Hanoi regiment of the Viet Minh was due to come in to that square and have a celebration. We had had no idea. And in the ten minutes that we were there, parked in that square, the square became packed with people awaiting the arrival of this hometown Viet Minh regiment. This was from our point of view sort of the enemy, you know, although nothing was declared at that time. Here I was sitting with an American major in uniform driving an American car—I think it was a little Jeep carryall—and surrounded by these people, absolutely surrounded by them. They didn't really pay much attention to us, thank God.

I was saying mentally to my assistant, “come on, come on. Say goodbye to your sister and get up here.” Well, to make a long story short he did, but we could not see how we could get out. The place was absolutely jam packed with people. It was a sizeable square that ordinarily would take up about a square block in the United States. Fortunately, the last French tank column to leave Hanoi came through at that point and started crossing the Red River Bridge down to Haiphong. We just pulled in behind the French and got across the bridge. So that was a little incident worthy of remembering.

From Haiphong, incidentally, MSTS, that is Military Sea Transport Service ships, American ships, came up and transported refugees from the north, 5,000 at a time, down to the southern part of Vietnam, Saigon and that area.

My wife got involved in that. She was working at that time. The Binh Xuyen rebellion, which I will explain shortly, had resulted in the death of the chief of the AID photo laboratory, Dixie Reese. As I said, everything was heating up during this time, and AID was desperate for somebody to take that over. My wife had some photographic experience, not very profound, but enough to count, and they asked her to take over and run the lab. In connection with that, she ran up to Hanoi and did a photo story on the refugees coming down, among other things.

Interesting historical note: That was the time of Dr. Tom Dooley, who later became rather famous in setting up the clinic in Laos. When we went up to Haiphong on two or three occasions pending its turnover, we stayed in the same hotel as Tom and ate a number of meals with him. We had to admire this energetic young Navy doctor going out and working in the refugee camps where they were staging pending getting on the American ships. That's just a little sidelight.

One other incident that occurred. Well, it wasn't really an incident—a situation: Just before the takeover of Hanoi, the consulate up there was a residential place, a house, set well back from the road, behind a lawn of 50 feet in depth perhaps. And they had a Viet Minh guard out in front of the consulate. The consul, by the way, stayed there, oh, six months or more after the occupation by Viet Minh. But it was very nerve-wracking, because when you'd go into the consulate or come out of the consulate, the Viet Minh guard had a burp gun, a small machine gun, that he pointed right at your belly button, all the time from the time you got out of the car, walked up the lawn, the 50 odd feet, and got in the door. Then he'd pick you up coming out of the door, machine gun pointed at you all the way, with his

finger on the trigger. And you couldn't help but think, “Gosh, what would happen if this fellow sneezed?”

Back in Saigon: Another (The Binh Xuyen) Rebellion

In Saigon we had another rebellion that I didn't see much of in the American press later on. It was the Binh Xuyen, nominally a religious sect but not really: a little bit closer to the Mafia than anything else. Emperor Bao Dai had given them control of the police force in Saigon. But Bao Dai had gone back to France in exile. Ngo Dinh Diem had been elected president, and he wanted the Binh Xuyen out. They rebelled. We had a rather violent civil war in Saigon when this occurred. I don't remember the exact date. But it was not too long after the Hanoi takeover, probably the fall of '54.

And there was a murder right in front of our house. I happened to live directly opposite the ambassador in a duplex along with Jim Carrigan and his wife—that is, they had the other half. And there was a shooting from one Vespa (motor scooter) to another right in front of the house, connected to that local rebellion.

So my boy—how old is he now? I guess about 10 or 11 at this time—grew up knowing the size of mortars from the sound and the caliber of ammunition. Was that a 30 caliber or 50 caliber machine gun, etcetera? It was an interesting period. The rebellion failed after two or three weeks.

We stayed two years. I didn't like Saigon. Not for the lack of interest in it, but I tolerate the tropics poorly. The heat bothers me a great deal. I didn't like it, so I was happy to leave in the Spring of '56.

USIS Operations in Saigon in Mid-1950'sAfter Division of Vietnam

Q: Your broadcasting, were you feeding stories to VOA?

FRANKLIN: No, we were doing mostly local work. Occasionally we'd send a piece to VOA, but really not very often. Nearly all was local production for placement on the local radio station. At that time there were two stations operating in Saigon, “Radio France Asie,” French Asian Radio which, of course, was owned and operated by the French government, and comparable perhaps to RIAS, you know, that sort of thing. Then Radio Saigon and, to the north, Radio Hue. We were putting things on tape, reel to reel tape in those days, and giving them to Vietnamese radio stations. And we curried their favor by giving them our equipment which they used for various programs. We got along very well with them.

Q: Well, I suppose, some of this was covering AID type of activities.

FRANKLIN: Part of it was that, yes. Part of it was blatant propaganda. Now we were getting very militant about opposition to the Viet Minh. And I remember, I got a book of Vietnamese proverbs and had it translated. (Of course, we had translators in the office.) I picked out anything that might be turned to apply to the anti-Viet Minh posture.

Q: So this was unattributed material.

FRANKLIN: Well, it was nominally attributed to the South Vietnamese government.

Q: Right.

FRANKLIN: But we prepared the spots. And we prepared them in typical American fashion with fanfares and music background and two and three voices. A lot of one minute spots. The stations played them to death. They really played them to death. I think they had quite an impact.

We also produced a cultural program. One of our officers, Mim Johnstone, had been reared in part in France and really spoke quite good French. So we asked her to do—I think it was a weekly program on American culture, all sorts of things. Cultural news from

the United States, music—no heavy hand at all. She did, and that was very popular. These were all, I think. We recorded the spots on disks in those days, the old 16-inch acetates. And her program was on tape, of course, then provided to the radio station. Very, very popular.

Q: Two things. One is that progressively as the cold war developed, especially in Vietnam and Thailand, the USIA was moving more and more into unattributed type of propaganda activities in support of the local government.

FRANKLIN: Exactly right.

Q: I suppose during your period in Saigon that the Viet Minh controlled vast areas of the country. And therefore radio would have been a particularly effective means of trying to reach them.

FRANKLIN: Exactly correct. And the Voice of America itself was very important with their daily Vietnamese program. It was run very efficiently by a fellow whose name I've forgotten, but he was a former missionary in Vietnam and spoke fluent Vietnamese—an American—and he did a very good job with that.

When I arrived there the post was “Indochina,” and Saigon was the capital of Indochina. Later, of course, we split up and had separate operations in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, or Kampuchea they call it now, Vientiane for Laos.

Q: I remember a fellow by the name of Olsen who was a political officer in Manila had been in Saigon. And he would go up to Phnom Penh to play bridge with French civilians and come back to report on conditions. That was his cover.

FRANKLIN: Well, we all did this. I was responsible for providing radio programs the three countries, what are now three countries. And I made frequent trips to Phnom Penh. Later Martin Ackerman became PAO there. And who was it? Ted Tanen was PAO in Laos,

where I also had to visit. We had far more than we could do for all this big area, really. We had to rely heavily on radio, because a great deal of the country is rural, as you know. How else are you going to reach these people?

One officer, Fred Reim, who was a former Broadway stage manager, had a good idea: He got together a cast of actors who went around giving little skits. All propaganda, if you will. But he had a regular tour going in our area around Saigon. Quite effective.

Q: Well, you said that you didn't do well in the tropics. Were you sick there?

FRANKLIN: I just tolerated the heat ill, I think. In those days we didn't have enough electricity to run two air conditioners. Jim Carrigan, who had moved in a few weeks before me, had an air conditioner, and I couldn't ask him to stop his so I could put one on, so I had no air conditioner.

Q: My recollection is Jim Carrigan got sick and left.

FRANKLIN: No, you're thinking of Jack Andrew, who died of a liver infection. Annette Andrew later married Stan Karnow [Author of Vietnam, A History. Stanley Karnow was at that time, and for many years thereafter, a correspondent in Southwest Asia.]. Several years obviously.

Q: I'll be darned. I just finished reading Karnow's history.

FRANKLIN: And I knew Stan later on.

You recall my mentioning the election of Ngo Dinh Diem who was, at least initially, “our man.” The one that we supported for president of the country. USIA played a very big hand in that, with radio spots, and I remember Jim Carrigan my neighbor who was running the press section at that time, turned out I don't know how many hundreds of thousands of little paper Vietnamese flags. The Viet Minh had their own flag. And the Vietnamese flag

was a yellow background with horizontal red stripes on it. But the whole idea was to instill patriotism and support Ngo Dinh Diem.

Ngo did very well when he first came in. He was an ascetic, you could say almost a recluse. And a very moral man. He got into trouble later on and got assassinated. That's all in the history books, and you don't need that from me.

Q: Well, in any event, according to your biography you went from there to Berlin.

To Berlin—RIAS—In 1956

FRANKLIN: Yes.

Q: In 1956.

FRANKLIN: In '56 I went to Berlin as Deputy Director of RIAS, the Radio In the American Sector. And, you know, having spoken no German whatever for eleven years, that was a challenge. That was like jumping into a pool of ice water. But I managed to survive. The house spoke German. You didn't hear English anywhere. We had 514 employees, as I remember the number, at RIAS, and I don't suppose more than a couple dozen of them spoke any English at all. Very few of them spoke fluent English.

Almost Immediately—Comes the Hungarian Revolt

The only notable thing at RIAS, I think, was that Gordon Ewing, who was director at that time, went on home leave leaving me in charge, as his deputy, when all of a sudden the Hungarian Revolution broke out. This was in the fall of '56. We had a very alert local by the name of Peter Schultze, who I think is still there, as head of the news operation. He was just clamoring to go to Budapest, and I said, “I can't write you orders to go to Budapest. It's a foreign country, in the Soviet orbit, et cetera.”

He persisted, so I finally said, well, you go to Vienna and you look up Gerry Gert, who was radio officer at that time in Vienna, and see what he tells you to do. I don't know the situation there.

Well, Peter went to Vienna, and he did look up Gerry Gert but not until after he had hitch-hiked into Budapest and scooped Europe, I must say, with the story of the Hungarian Revolution—on-the-street interviews and that sort of thing. Then he came back to Vienna and put it on the air from RIAS, over a line, as the premiere. Then, of course, we gave it to the rest of Europe. That was quite a little coup in that sense, but it was not a very significant thing.

An Aside: Franklin Acquires Fluencyin Several Languages

Q: Bob has said that he learned Spanish from the servants in Tangier and French and German. What other language did you say?

FRANKLIN: Well, I got interested in Russian when I was listening to all this Russian on the Voice of America. There was a White Russian in Tangier, an elderly man in rather bad straits, and I was very happy to pay him a very small fee to learn some Russian—along with one of our locals.

We studied for a year and a half. I want to tell you that studying Russian for a year and a half is like studying a Western European language for about three months, because Russian has so few cognitives with English, and their writing, of course, is very different.

But I got a fair rating. We had a test, if you recall. Later on they were very interested in language testing at FSI. And I qualified as fluent in French, fluent in German, social in Spanish and social in Russian—you know, social level. Well, that was all right.

Q: And you mentioned Swahili?

FRANKLIN: Oh, yes. Well, that was later on in Africa. I picked up some Swahili phrases, the common phrases that you use. As I had done with Tagalog in the Philippines. All you have to do is listen.

Q: Well, that evidently is the key to learning languages.

FRANKLIN: It is to me. I used to teach Morse code. And we found out some very interesting things. It has no relationship to intelligence. Some people have an ear and some people don't have an ear. It's like having an ear for music or an eye for painting, for example. I don't have an eye for painting. You could easily mistake a painting I might do for something done by a four year old.

Q: Jim Flood, did you know Jim Flood?

FRANKLIN: Yes, I knew Jim Flood. Not well.

Q: Jim was a natural with languages. And he said to me one time, in studying a language like Spanish or something, don't fight it, you know. The language exists. Go with it. But I've noticed many people, why do they do that? Anyhow, that's beside the point.

Let's go back to RIAS for a moment. We're in Berlin. And RIAS played a very effective role, I think, in communicating with Germany.

FRANKLIN: Yes, this was a very important entity at that time. It was an expensive thing. We had a $3 million annual budget, which was far more then than it is now, $3 million. And it was to all intents and purposes a German station. It was run like a German station by Germans, only supervised by USIA officers. We had a very small supervisory staff. We had a chief engineer, Jim Alley. We had two program officers at the time.

Let me see, Fred Trembour and George Czucka were our two program officers, both fluent in German, to control what went out over the air, the scripts.

1957-58 From RAIS to Radio Munich to Washington

After about a year at RIAS, I got a phone call from Bob Button who at that time was Chief of the Voice of America operations in Washington, fairly recently appointed. I had met him earlier in Saigon, and he was apparently impressed with what we were doing out in Saigon, favorably. There had been a little political spat with the director of the Voice of America Program Center in Munich, a fellow named D'Alasandro, Aldo D'Alasandro, who was a very bright guy and very efficient guy, but who also had some very extreme rightist opinions—according to reports; I don't know this personally.

Anyway, there were some clashes. So I was asked very suddenly after just being at RIAS a year if I would go down and act as Director of Voice of America Program Center in Munich. Now, there we concentrated on picking up local European news. We broadcast in eight languages.

Don't ask me to reel them off, but they were the Soviet-orbit languages, including Russian. I was there for a year. Then it got into a political wringer once more—I can't even recall all the details right now—.

1959: Washington—Office of Private Cooperation

Anyway, I went back to Washington. I did a tour there with the now defunct Office of Private Cooperation which was very interesting. And we managed to get a great many donated English books sent overseas, good ones. One of my jobs was bumming free transportation on freighters and that sort of thing. Each of us had several areas to deal with. Mine were transportation and banking and radio broadcasting, and the insurance industry. I was there for three years. My wife had fallen quite ill, so I extended for a year although I was originally slated for only two years.

Q: Did you travel around the country a good bit?

FRANKLIN: Yes. Around the eastern part. I didn't get out to the western part at all unfortunately. I got up to New York very frequently, to Boston, Chicago, I think as far west as Omaha one time. This was kind of a sales job, in a manner of speaking, to interest people in doing whatever they could, especially corporations with external connections and with foreign offices, to get a little plug put in here and there, bulletins, that sort of thing.

Q: Did you find they were generally receptive?

FRANKLIN: Yes, I found some of them quite receptive. One of my biggest successes was with some life insurance companies. I remember New York Life even produced a little film for us on how to have a book drive, you know, collecting good books from people to be sent overseas.

1962: Manila—Without Household Furnishings

Q: So your next post was Manila.

FRANKLIN: Ah, yes. Manila, 1962. We went out to Manila. Flew out, of course, with the minimum amount of stuff that you're allowed to take as air freight to set up. They put us in a little apartment to await the arrival of all our household goods. And our stuff didn't arrive and didn't arrive, didn't arrive. We found out that the ship sank. Everything aboard. And because we expected to be in Manila three years, we said, “well, let's take everything. Why store all this stuff?” We put everything on the ship and it went down.

Q: How did that happen?

FRANKLIN: There are two stories. I will tell you the official story first that they were trying to outrun a typhoon and bumped into one of the Okinawa group with violence; just piled up on it.

I did quite a bit of yachting in Manila. And one of my friends in the yacht club worked for a shipping company there. He told me that they had a very junior third officer who had made an hour's mistake on the chart. And they ran full steam ahead into an island.

Well, we got some money back. Nowhere near, of course, what we lost. Some of this was old family silver, things that we couldn't replace—but that's part of the way it goes. They gave us an emergency leave, and we went up to Hong Kong. We spent money. We spent money. We got sick of spending money, believe it or not, replacing these things that we had lost. Of course, many things we couldn't replace.

There was nothing terribly interesting that went on in Manila. I was assigned there as information officer for the AID program. I actually had an office in the AID building, which was across the street from the embassy. I did all sorts of things. I made a lot of movies there. We had a good movie circuit going in Manila, 35 millimeter, for theaters.

Q: Were these unattributed type movies?

FRANKLIN: No, these were directly relating, most of them, to the AID program. One of the hats that I wore was liaison with the American business community, and a couple of those films that I made were to show the benefits the American business community brought to the Philippines. This was a little bit out of the ordinary USIA line, but still germane. And I did radio. I did exhibits. I did practically everything, all with the support of the people in the USIA central office which was across the street. I was a one man operation. I think I had a local secretary, but outside of that, everybody around me was AID staff. I worked in what they call the Program Support office, which was the office that published pamphlets, instructional, booklets, and posters.

Q: I was going to ask you, because I started the regional production center there in 1950. And later, at some point, I don't know when, the Philippine government under the AID

program developed a big central printing plant to produce AID type material. Was that during your time?

FRANKLIN: No. By the way, you asked me about the fellow who was in the AID program who was in Saigon who came over to Manila. That's Hank Pascal.

Q: That's right.

FRANKLIN: Henry Pascal. He was very helpful to us. We did a lot of publishing through him by contract, obviously where RSC couldn't do it for one reason or another.

TDY Interlude Back in Saigon

When I was serving in Manila, the fellow who was slated to be press attach# in Saigon had a family problem, I think his wife had glaucoma as I remember, and was delayed in arriving. The departing press attach# had frantically to get to someplace else—I don't know why that was—so because I was nearby, and was familiar with the area they asked me to come over and wear the press attach#s hat for a little while.

A couple of things there stick in my memory. I was there, I don't know, maybe a month, maybe even slightly less. But while I was there I had the embarrassing little incident of having an Indian, that is from India, publisher from the Madras area, owner of a newspaper and a publisher. Acting as his own correspondent, he had come in to see me, the American press attach# to ask about this and that. And I swear his accent was so thick that I got embarrassed asking him, “What did you say?” Shows to go you English ain't always English. It depends a lot on how well it's understood.

Another rather annoying incident that came up that I would like to relate for the record. About that time the very first baby flat top was coming over from the United States bringing the very first batch of helicopters to Vietnam for these American troops. And we got

notice of it by telegram. But it was secret. The telegram was marked secret for a couple of obvious reasons.

And some damn fool politician, one of the Congressman or a Senator, I've forgotten which, opened his yap and gave it to the press long before the ship arrived. I think the ship had just departed Seattle as I recall. And I was put in the very embarrassing position being the press attach# and dealing with all these news hungry American correspondents asking about this ship which had a certain significance at the time, since it was the first one to come.

And I finally wound up going down to the dock which in Saigon was at the end of the main streets. We used to call it Rue Catinat—I've forgotten the new name of it. But anyway, there was the ship, this great big ship, blocking the sun. And helicopters all aboard. And one of the correspondents came up to me and said, well, what have you got to say now? And I said, “Ship? What ship?” What else could I say?

All right. Now, I spent two years in Manila, more or less uneventful. Then Dick Barnsley came through. And he said, Bob, you speak French. (This is a curse.) He said, “We have a great need for people in the Congo. I had you all slated to go to Sydney in Australia.” (I would have loved it; I've never been there.) But he said, “we have such a need. Will you go?” Well, all right. I went to the Congo.

The (Belgian) Congo; Branch Post at Coquilhatville

Q: You were ordered to the Congo which was called Zaire?

FRANKLIN: No, it was still the Congo then. It did not become Zaire for several years. And my new branch post was 400 miles up the Congo River from the capital of Leopoldville.

Q: Good old Dick Barnsley.

FRANKLIN: Yes, it was an interesting place.

Q: You were in Leopoldville?

FRANKLIN: No, I arrived in Leopoldville and then flew up to a town called at that time Coquilhatville which was later renamed M'Bandaka, 400 miles up river from Leopoldville. I had an assistant, a fellow by the name of Fred Hunter, a young man, a very religious fellow who was very serious about his work and did a very good job. By the way, my wife was taking a course at Philippines Women University and wanted to finish it, so I went on alone a couple of months ahead of her, which was convenient in a way; found a house to live in and all that sort of thing. For a two-bit sized post, we had a fairly effective program, I think. We provided a lot of materials to the schools. We had a daily film show which was very, very popular. Just anything we could get in films was popular. We had a library, a small library which, considering the number of people who spoke English, was very good. And we got very much into the good graces of the governor of the province who was located there. An intense young man named Engulu—more about which later.

Another Rebellion For Franklin—This Timethe Katanga Province Attempt to Secede

I can't remember the exact date. But a rebellion started in Katanga province shortly after my arrival. Bear in mind that the Congo is roughly the size of all of the United States east of the Mississippi River. We were in the northwest corner and Katanga was in the southeast, down at the other end, 1000-odd miles away I guess, maybe more. We were just south of Ubangi Province, the one where you find the dish-shaped lips, the Ubangis. They were just north of us. And it was very, very rural.

But we did have about 150 American missionaries in in the area for which I was responsible. Their church was the church to which Lyndon Baines Johnson belonged. When we found this out we notified the ambassador, and we suddenly got quite a bit more attention than we would have otherwise.

In any event, a very brutal rebellion was started by dissident Katangese and spurred on by Belgian interests who were loath to lose the country, in which they were losing commercial control bit by bit. This spread northward from Katanga first in a very brutal fashion to Bukavu which was on the eastern border, the border with Rwanda. There are a lot of stories that go with that which I'm not qualified to tell, where we had a young vice-consul lost in the hinterland and surrounded by rebel troops and all that. Quite exciting.

We communicated by short wave radio by the way. There were no telephones that were in any way reliable. And everything was done by short wave radio. And then the rebels got up to Stanleyville. You can get the story of Stanleyville from Max Kraus, who had arrived at the same time as I and was sent up there as PAO. I don't recall if Max was actually held prisoner or what. The consul was captured and held prisoner, I remember, for a time.

Anyway, this whole thing spread and spread and spread with very little resistance from the Congolese Army. And the point came to where they started toward us. When they were 50 kilometers away with trucks—they had acquired a good many trucks—they simply had stopped at a river because there was a little fording problem.

Q: This is now when they were trying to achieve independence?

The Simba Marauders

FRANKLIN: No, they were trying to achieve control for commercial interests. Really. You'll get a dozen different stories about this. Tshombe, Moise Tshombe was in large part sympathetic to them. He later became President. However, these rebels called themselves Simbas [”lion” in Swahili language.]. And they were quite inhuman. They'd go into a town and seek out everybody who could read and write. These were the intellectuals. The Simbas would take them all out to a field and gun them down. Just like that. They didn't want anyone who could do anything effective against them. And they committed many other atrocities, as well.

Evacuation From Coquilhatville Via C-130

So anyway, they came through Boerde, west toward Coquilhatville, which is a couple of hundred miles. But they stopped at a river just 50 kilometers from us, as they were having a little trouble fording it. We had several C-130s at that time, large transport aircraft, in support of the Congolese Army. I called for a C-130, and asked my mission friends to call in all their remote missionaries by radio. We all met at the Coquilhatville airport. We took out 150 missionaries, my wife, who had arrived by that time, Ted Hunter, my assistant, and I guess one vehicle, the official USIA carryall. We all flew down to Leopoldville.

As it happened, at the same time that this was going on, the Congolese government had quite recently hired a bunch of mercenaries from Rhodesia and South Africa (who took a very contemptuous view of all blacks I must say) and they sent some of them up to Coquilhatville. I think there were only about 50 of them. They made a little parade. And the rebellion abruptly stopped at the river which the rebels never did cross.

Later Fred went back, but by this time I was due for leave, because I'd had no leave after Manila. And everything was up in the air. We didn't know if we were going to reopen there or what. So I took leave, went home and saw my grandson born, which turned out very well. I think also in that period I took the counter-insurgency course at FSI which was about a three week course.

1967: Home Leave; Then Return to the Congo—Bukavu on Lake Kivu

Before taking leave we were just kicking around Leopoldville because nobody knew what to do with me, where I was going or anything like that. We had a change in PAOs from Steve Baldanza to John Mewinkle about that time. So anyway, they said, go take your leave and come back and we'll see what we can do.

I came back. Again, I kicked around for a little while. We were living in the houses of people who were on leave. It was a ridiculous situation. Then I was sent up as PAO to to Bukavu.

Now, Bukavu was this town where they had had a very serious attack during the Simba operation, but they were recovering. It's actually a beautiful place; one of the most beautiful places in the world. It's comparable to Lake Tahoe, California. Somewhat larger, the lake. And the climate was just ideal. The average maximum temperature was about 85 during the warm periods. And the coldest night I ever saw I think was 58. Of course, we were near the equator, about 200 miles away, but we were high, just 100 feet short of a mile high, I remember. Bukavu is built on five peninsulas like fingers sticking out into Lake Kivu. Lake Kivu is the lake that's just north of the big lake, Tanganyika, which received fame as the last stand of the African Queen. They finally wound up on Lake Tanganyika in that film.

Anyway, Bukavu is right smack on the border with Rwanda. Well, everything simmered down. They finally allowed me to have my wife up. She had had to stay in Leopoldville for a month or two. And our son by this time was off in school and married. We had sent him to college from Manila. So it was just my wife and myself.

We got things going pretty well in Bukavu, an effective program: motion picture teams out showing films all over the area, materials to schools. I wound up publishing a little monthly newsletter in a local Swahili dialect, which I had translated by a friendly American missionary who spoke the dialect, which was quite effective. We called it “Habari za Dunia” which is Swahili for “News of the World.”

We got our news from the Voice of America. Over the course of a month I kept making notes on the main things, and then cranked in whatever local news and pictures that we could.

Everything Was Happy in Bukavu—Until—

So we were very happy. And in fact in 1967 everybody in Bukavu was very pleased. We had a Fourth of July party at the consular residence which was very successful. All the local official and para-official people came. And we had American hamburgers and that sort of thing.

The Mercenaries Rebel on the MorningAfter July 4th Celebration

At six o'clock on the morning of July 5th we heard gunfire from the other end of town. This turned out to be the start of a rebellion on the part of the mercenaries, who had not been paid by the Congolese government, with Katangese troops. And they had decided to take over Bukavu, this was just a local situation: Take over Bukavu and hold it for ransom, so to speak, until the government paid them. Mobutu was Congolese president then, as now.

Q: These mercenaries were from Rhodesia?

FRANKLIN: Yes. Well, there were a few of them from Europe. But the greatest number of them were either South African or Rhodesian, either northern or southern Rhodesia at that time.

Evacuation Again! Across the River Rusizito Rwanda

And they came in firing. Well, the consul was Frank Crigler, T. Frank Crigler. Anyway, Frank ordered a convoy of all Americans that we could get. They were mistreating American missionaries out in the bush. We heard radio reports. So everybody who could got into the head missionary's house—he had a nice big house—and we formed a convoy. We went across the Rusizi River, the border into Rwanda.

There are two bridges across the Rusizi at Bukavu. One of them was blocked. The other one was down by the slaughterhouse. And for some reason or other nobody thought to

block that one and we got across. And, mind you, we took only what we could carry in our cars. Everything else was left. At that time I had a little Volkswagen bug—not much room for freight! So we got across the river. No sooner were we across than we were fired upon by Rwanda troops who thought they were being invaded and who were guarding the border.

Well, the reason we wanted to cross the border for one thing was that the airport that Bukavu used was in Rwanda. Well, I managed to intimidate the soldiers—that's the only way I can put it—about the horrible things that would happen to them if they gave us a bad time. And they let us through. The consul, didn't speak much French at this point. He had come from Latin America only about a month before and was fluent in Spanish but had very little French.

Anyway, we got through. Nobody was hit by the firing. I'm not sure whether they were warning shots or not, but they were very, very close. We were maybe a car- length apart, and the bullets were hitting between the cars right in front on the road.

So we got to the plane. This was a US Air Force C-123 transport they had sent us from Leopoldville. A great many people went out. My wife, as it turned out, had had an appointment to fly to Nairobi that day to see a specialist about a very bad sinus problem. Well, of course, everything had dropped dead at the airport—no commercial flights in or out—because of the rebellion.

Everybody who wanted to stay in the area drove or rode up to Kigali where Leo Cyr was our ambassador. He did a marvelous job of making us at home. My wife flew from there to Nairobi the following day. We didn't know what was going to happen. Okay. I wanted to get to Nairobi to see what was happening to my wife, because she had a serious medical problem. I wound up driving over to Nairobi, which was maybe 500 miles, across the center of Africa. I had trouble getting air passage quickly. The roads were pretty good, however. Not so much in Rwanda, but in Uganda and Kenya which comprised most of

the trip. The British had done a fairly good job of road building. A lot of them were dirt, but good dirt roads.

Back to Bukavu—Ousted Again by Mercenaries—Over to Rwanda

So anyway, I got there. My wife, I found, was all right. There was absolutely nothing to do. I didn't want to stay in Nairobi. And things looked to be simmering down. Well, I though, maybe I'd go back and help. For this I ultimately got a superior service award, by the way.

After just a few days in Nairobi, I actually went back in to Bukavu, although I did not stay in my house which by that time had been looted completely.

Q: You didn't have much luck with your personal possessions.

FRANKLIN: That's twice we lost everything.

I stayed in one of the few apartments that were normally occupied by the communications personnel in the consulate. I stayed in one of those for a few days. Of course, everything was disrupted by this point. The Congolese army had driven the mercenaries out of town for the moment but they were not far away. We started distributing food flown in by our embassies to the natives gained a lot of popularity in that respect.

Then the governor, who was the same Engulu who had been with me on the other side and who had thereafter been appointed as governor of this province, said we had 45 minutes to leave before they closed the borders. The mercenaries were on the march.

Oh, I must tell you one point that put us in pretty well with Governor Engulu. When the first attack came, he fled his palace, his big governor's mansion, on foot, and took refuge with two of his security men in the consular residence which was a good distance away from his headquarters, but quite near our house. The wife of the consul didn't speak much French either. So she called on my wife, whose French is not great but really quite adequate for most things, to go down and pacify the governor and his aides. She put

this fellow in the attic. He was scared to death he was going to get slaughtered. And she arranged to smuggle his wife out by motorboat. (Don't forget we were at the edge of a lake, and the eastern side of the lake was Rwanda.) The Mobil Oil agent, an American whose name I've forgotten, was the one who owned the motorboat and took her out.

So we got 45 minutes to leave. My Belgian secretary there had a blind, dependent husband, and I felt obliged to get them across first. This left me practically no time to go grab what I could that was left in the house and take it over. When I got to the bridge there was a Congolese soldier there who pointed a machine gun at my chest and said I was not to cross unless I gave them the equivalent of $2,000 in Belgian francs—which, of course, I didn't have. At this point my friend Engulu pops out of the sentry box. He was standing there watching what was going on. He said, “Mr. Franklin is okay. He's cultural. Let him go.”

Oh, I'll tell you. That was a very fortunate thing.

The Saga of Trying to Set Up MakeshiftRadio Communications in Rwanda

I managed to rescue a lot of radio equipment that I had had with me personally. And once across the border, we set up a radio monitoring operation, because the mercenaries were using radio and we were trying to find out what they were doing.

On the other hand, the Rwandan government was so nervous about all these goings-on that they prohibited us from transmitting by radio back to Washington and to Leopoldville, Kinshasa it was called by then. We didn't know what to do. The consul and I were in communication by little portable VHF gizmos. And the communicators, of course, used CIA equipment. (They—the Communicators—were CIA employees as a matter of fact.) The one communicator who was there brought over a really archaic portable radio with batteries but with no battery connectors. He and I got together and made up jury-rigged battery connectors.

Rwanda is an odd country in that there are very few cities. The population is spread out almost evenly all across the country. It's hard to find a place where you can even take a leak. Somebody's always watching, you know, on the road.

But we did find a little copse, a little wood, and we brought this portable equipment. He had to contact with Asmara, the big Signal Corps station in Eritrea. But he couldn't. In the meantime, because I didn't know where to go or what to do I got out the pump to my car and pretended that I had a flat tire and was pumping it up. And I stayed there while Jon, the communicator, was in the wood, a few dozen yards off the road. Every time a car would come by I'd pump with my foot, you see. Nobody paid any attention until this one car stopped. And he said in French, “Just what is the trouble, Monsieur?” And I said, “Oh, a flat tire.”

“Yes. I've seen you pumping this up. I've passed here three times in the last half hour and seen you pumping it up. I am of Rwandan security.” Bear in mind we had been prohibited from any radio transmission.

So I said, “Well, I think I found the trouble. It's the valve. I'll screw it in tighter, and I think I can get away from here.”

“Tres bien, Monsieur. Au revoir,” and he left.

I very quickly got word to Jon that we'd have to do something else. He wasn't having any luck anyway, so I said, “well, I'll go and I'll come back in about 20 minutes. You have everything ready, get near the edge of the woods and when I come, throw it all in the car. This we did.

Q: That would make a good movie.

FRANKLIN: It would, you know? Now, our consul had been very, very friendly with the honorary German consul in Bukavu. He was a nice young fellow who was running a

chinchona [raw material for quinine] plantation, of which there are several in that region. He was friendly in turn with a German fellow who had been sent in as supervisor for a UN tea-growing project in Rwanda, and who lived quite near the airport. We had had no success at all in finding any refuge for ourselves. I mean, here we had radio equipment and other stuff with us and nowhere to put it.

The German consul said, “I think I can get you in. This fellow's a bachelor. He's got a house. It's not a big house. But it will be a room, at least.”

To make a long story short we brought in our good radio, a Collins transceiver. Jon had brought it as well as the battery portable but it takes power to run it; you can't run it off batteries. Well, we set up in this back bedroom and rigged a really ridiculous antenna over a peach tree in the back yard, and we made contact with Asmara.

Now, I'm an old radio operator. So I did the actual operation in Morse. And Jon, the communicator, who was expert at one-time-pad stuff, did all the enciphering and deciphering. We went on for a couple of days like this. And the consul in the meantime was out gathering—

Q: He was contacting Leopoldville.

FRANKLIN: No, it went directly to Asmara, then to Washington and back to Leopoldville, I think is the way it worked. But it doesn't matter; we got out. In the meantime, the consul was out finding out what's going on then returning to this little house to write reports which we sent out.

This went on for a couple of days and we got out message after message, report after report of what's going on. And eventually the mercenaries took over the town. They came back in and occupied everything. One of them, in fact, was living in my house, I learned later.

So there was nothing to do. I mean, we couldn't attack them. We had to rely on the Congolese Army which we did, and they eventually got them out and resolved the situation.

Meantime, on my birthday, which is August 9th, I got a telegram over our little haywire system in the back bedroom of this tea-planting supervisor that my wife was going into surgery the next day.

“Please go to Nairobi. It's a serious sinus surgery.”

Well, what could I do? We couldn't do anymore there. We had done about all the reporting we could. By this time the traffic had slowed down so that Jon could do both enciphering and the Morse transmission. And he didn't need me, although I was useful up till then.

So I set off for Nairobi. There was a Papal Nuncio that came down from Rome to see what he could do, and he had chartered the Mobil Oil plane. This was a plane operating in the region whose pilot I knew, an Italian fellow, and I bummed a ride with them up to Kigali. Well, It took me about three days or four days to get from Kigali to Nairobi. My wife's surgery was all over. It turned out okay.

Another thing that I might mention that has a curious little twist to it: When we had to evacuate to Kigali after the second Congo rebellion, Ambassador Leo Cyr asked me to stay as his Public Affairs Officer. His former PAO had just left, and we had worked very well together. I had in fact acted briefly as a kind of DCM for him for a while in the absence of his regular DCM.

I said, “Sure. That's nice. I'd like it.” So he put the usual notice through channels there in Kigali—and was turned down. I'd had a tourist visa to get into Kigali, but that was about to expire. And the reason he was turned down was because, “I was a refugee from the Congo.” And I'll tell you if you were tarred with that brush at the time, you just weren't

for anybody in Rwanda. They were scared to death of anybody from the Congo, be they white, pink, green or black.

So while I was assigned as Public Affairs Officer to Kigali for a very brief period, it didn't last long. As soon as my tourist visa ran out I was obliged to pack up and head out for Nairobi.

Refugees in Nairobi

Well, that's the end of that story except that we lost everything. And we wound up in Nairobi as refugees for something like nine months where I helped out with what I could do. I started a daily radio program in Nairobi in Swahili language that went over very well.

But they had no slot for me. And finally, Mark Lewis, who was head of the African section came through and said, okay, we'll give you a transfer to somewhere else. And they sent me to Tunis.

1968: Tunis for Two Years—Then Retirement

FRANKLIN: Yes, that was in '68. I went to Tunis, spent two years there, not very happily for a number of reasons, and they had at that point an offer of retirement. I was just 50 years old. And I thought, “now is a good time.” I wasn't very happy with the immediate prospects, and so I took advantage of it. And I'm glad I did. That's about the story.

End of interview